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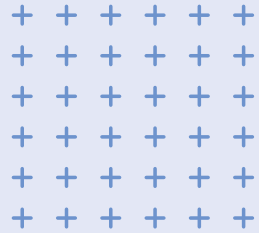
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PUBLISHER'S MEMO

Pride Source's annual wedding edition returns in quality glossy format, made possible by the LGBTQ-affirming organizations and businesses whose support keeps this publication alive and in your hands. This year's stories reflect both the joy of love and the urgency of this moment: couples finding creative community when family falls short, vendors and allies putting everything on the line, and a Michigan that continues to show up for its queer residents.

Publishing independent LGBTQ+ media has never been more important or more challenging. If BTL has ever informed, moved or reflected your lived experience back to you, we hope you'll consider subscribing at pridesource.com/subscribe. And as you flip through this year's edition, we encourage you to vote with your wallet: choose to work with businesses that choose you.

ON THE COVER

Photography: Alex Lucila Photo
Wedding Couple: Kayla Hanselman and Koty Coats
Venue: Planterra Conservatory



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FLOWER POWER



Kristen Griffith-VanderYacht.
Courtesy photo

For floral designer Kristen Griffith-VanderYacht, flowers are living art, maximalism is a form of resistance and modesty is never the answer

By Chris Azzopardi

Kristen Griffith-VanderYacht knows what holds LGBTQ+ couples back from their wildest floral dreams — and he's here to tell them they don't have to. The internationally lauded floral designer, named one of Harper's Bazaar's top florists, has made a career of bringing fantasy to life, with work in *Vogue* and on Netflix. "We all want the fantasy," he says. "But sometimes we convince ourselves it's not for us."

It is, of course, within Griffith-VanderYacht's ethos to tell you otherwise — that you deserve this. Or, as he puts it: "This one day out of 365 is for you. You get whatever your fantasy is. Tell me what your fantasy is. Then let's work backwards from there."

Griffith-VanderYacht's love of flowers began in his mother's Palmer Woods backyard, among rows of peonies and "The Bodyguard" soundtrack on cassette. "It was the right combination for my little gay ass to flourish in," he says of those young, carefree years.

Since May, Griffith-VanderYacht has led in-house floral design at Planterra Conservatory, a family-owned botanical garden and event space in West Bloomfield, with services extending to off-site venues. There's a dedicated on-site studio, oversized coolers and a staff equipped to support transformational design ideas.

"We can take a blank space and turn it into a jungle," he says. Planterra got on his radar when he moved back to the Detroit area from Seattle, and it stood out immediately. "It's very rare that something has such an astounding reputation," he says, adding that history and caliber don't always go hand in hand — but here, they do. "I found that to be really intriguing."

David L. Di Vincenzo, vice president and

creative director of Planterra, was drawn to Griffith-VanderYacht's ability to "treat florals as living design." "What I also appreciate about Kristen is that, despite his talent, he doesn't take floral design too seriously; he approaches it with a genuine sense of joy," Di Vincenzo says. "Flowers are a language, and after many years of designing, one naturally develops a personal vocabulary of blooms. It has been both energizing and refreshing for Kristen to bring his own floral vocabulary into the creative dialogue with our team."

Before returning to Michigan to take up the post at Planterra, Griffith-VanderYacht owned Wild Bloom, his own floral design studio in Seattle. But his career began in New York, where he interned at Sprout Home in Brooklyn, trained under head designer Doan Ly and eventually launched his own studio — first called Full Aperture Floral, later rebranded as Wild Bloom. New York put him on the map in other ways, too: running to drop off bouquets for New York Magazine's open call, he burst into the photoshoot and ended up in front of photographer Erik Madigan Heck. Griffith-VanderYacht snagged a two-page spread in the magazine.

In 2017, Griffith-VanderYacht curated over 2,000 flowers for "Burlesque" actress Julianne Hough's outdoor wedding in Idaho — his first celebrity wedding. For him, it was "a really big moment, to be able to enter that space and be trusted with her wedding."

His work has since brought pops of color to some of the biggest magazines — *Vogue*, *Town & Country*, *New York Magazine*, *People* and *Martha Stewart Weddings* — and on TV, his designs have been featured on *E!* and "Good Morning America." And in 2020, he was featured on the Netflix series "The Big Flower Fight," self-described as the show's "sassy head judge with a big heart."

Doing flowers in Detroit, he says, is a

different universe from New York, where he cut his teeth. "Anyone who's ever driven in New York City, or taken a taxi in New York City, can imagine just what trying to deliver to a wedding in the middle of Times Square at a restaurant is like," he says, comparing it to "The Amazing Race." At Planterra, the logistics recede and the flowers take center stage, plus he has always admired Detroit for being a "real town for artists," from murals to Motown artists and even the area's culinary scene.

"After spending so much time away," he says, "to have the opportunity to share my art and work with couples and create beautiful weddings here is such an exciting time in my life."



"Gold Midsummer," an arrangement by Kristen Griffith-VanderYacht. Courtesy photo

Always more, never less

Designing for a wedding means designing for two people at one of the most emotionally heightened moments of their lives. Griffith-VanderYacht knows that to make the flowers work, he first has to make the relationship work — at least the one between him and his clients. Trust, he's learned, is the precondition for beauty.



Kristen Griffith-VanderYacht. Courtesy photo

“My job is to empower you to make the best design decisions you can for your special day. And within that, I have to advocate for you. And advocating for you is telling you: No, girl, that’s an ugly combo.”

— Kristen Griffith-VanderYacht

“My job is to empower you to make the best design decisions you can for your special day,” he says. “And within that, I have to advocate for you. And advocating for you is telling you: No, girl, that’s an ugly combo.”

For every couple, he has one relatively simple goal: “When you are walking into your reception room, or you walk into your ceremony, you walk in feeling excited and a little bit relieved, but more than anything, surprised.”

Kelcie and Noelle Ferrara-Gershon, who married at Planterra in May 2025, said Griffith-VanderYacht’s floral designs “beautifully complemented” the venue’s existing greenery, with an arrangement over the stone arch in their ceremony space honoring their Jewish heritage.

“We wanted to have a lot of greenery and for the florals to add to, rather than overshadow, the already beautiful venue,” Kelcie says. “We received so many compliments on how the bouquets were gorgeous and the deep burgundy blended with the green and gold colors of our day so elegantly.”

For queer couples, he encourages out-of-the-box thinking — flowers have no gender here, and maximalism is not just welcome but encouraged. “When it comes to flowers, you can never have too much,” he says. It’s a philosophy that doubles as an invitation: to be seen, to take up space, to resist the impulse to shrink. “I try to encourage them to face whatever internalized homophobia they might be having.”

“The simple act of getting married for queer couples is already

an affirmation, and in many ways, in defiance of the norms, in defiance of what people and society has told you you’re allowed to do for hundreds and hundreds of years. So just go full tilt, embrace it, go all out. Modesty is just not something I would encourage. Go big. The goal is to only do this once.”

There’s also a more practical case for going all out, and it comes down to the attention span of the guests. “You have three seconds to make an impression before somebody has gotten distracted and moved on. You gotta hit them upside the head when they first walk through the door.”

Maximalism, he notes, is back in full force — no more simple white and green motifs — and he sees it running parallel to the broader interior design shift away from millennial gray toward wood finishes, gilded details and old-library warmth. He’s also excited about tribute arrangements honoring loved ones or pets who can’t be there, statement ceremony backdrops like arches, hoops and flower walls, and escort card tables reimaged as installation moments — cards tied to individual bud vases that guests collect on arrival, then bring to their seats, where the vases become the centerpieces.

Since Griffith-VanderYacht lives and breathes flowers, he’s thinking about the things most people aren’t, including what he believes most people fundamentally misunderstand about them. “Their presence, their form, their color, their fragrance — all of this is an actual, living, real-life, tangible miracle,” he says. “It’s living art.”

It also means thinking about why flowers feel disposable — and

why consumerism is to blame. “They’re too disposable. You go to a grocery store, they’re right there; they’re 3 bucks. Imagine if we took those flowers away. All of a sudden, they’re a commodity.”

The problem, he says, runs deeper than price tags. “We are so obsessed with consumerism and how to get the biggest bang for our buck that we have completely misread the purpose and have misaligned our values for what our relationship to flowers should be. Our understanding, especially in America, and our relationship with flowers needs some work.”

It’s a message he’s been taking on the road — most recently to daytime TV. Earlier this year, he appeared on “The Drew Barrymore Show,” where Barrymore called his new book, “Flower Love,” “a coffee table piece of art” and “elevated but instructive.” When co-host Ross Mathews asked for advice on preserving flowers, Griffith-VanderYacht asked for his hand, then delivered something closer to a meditation than a tutorial: “Flowers are not supposed to last. Listen to me: They’re not supposed to last. Their job is to help us stay in the present. They grow, they blossom, they thrive. And then they’re gone.”

It’s a philosophy that extends well beyond the vase. In conversation, Griffith-VanderYacht’s thoughts on ephemera touch every corner of his life, perhaps nowhere more pointedly than in his identity as a Black gay man navigating a very niche industry. Or as he puts it with characteristic flair: “If Grace Jones and RuPaul had a baby, that’d be me.”



“I recognize that there are not a lot of florists who are male,” says Griffith-VanderYacht, who was nominated for an NAACP Image Award in 2024. “There are not a lot of florists who are Black. And there are not a lot of florists who are male, Black and gay. That trifecta, you don’t really see a ton in this industry.”

That awareness carries with it a sense of responsibility. “I am standing on the shoulders of entertainers, public figures, designers, creatives, artisans and trailblazers,” he continues. “So I want to make sure that any time I have an opportunity, I’m leaving the door open for other young artists to be able to walk through. I’ve always looked at very public spaces as an opportunity — not for me, but for designers and artists who look like me after me.”

And he’s thinking long term. “When I leave Planterra — or die, or retire, or whatever — I want them to still feel very confident that they can find another version of me for the next generation.”



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Calvin University Chapel. Photo: Calvin University

The Professor Who Officiated a Wedding and Lost Everything

Joseph Kuilema's fight against Calvin University could impact LGBTQ+ allies statewide

By Sarah Bricker Hunt

Joseph Kuilema keeps his Professor of the Year award on a shelf in his office at Grand Valley State University, where

he now teaches. It was voted on by Calvin University's graduating seniors in 2019, the same year the administration denied him tenure for the second time over his support for LGBTQ+ inclusion. He'd been denied in 2017, too, and both times had his contract renewed for two more years rather than being let go. "It's a good reminder that my quarrel was never with the students," Kuilema tells BTL, "and that this was never about teaching."

What it was about, depending on who you ask, is either a professor who violated the expectations of a Christian institution or a man who helped two of his former students access their civil rights and was punished for it. In 2022, Calvin University terminated Kuilema after he officiated the wedding of a former student, a trans man, to his wife. Now Kuilema's case is heading to the Michigan Supreme Court, where it could establish new legal ground on whether

Michigan's civil rights law protects people who are fired not for who they are, but for who they stand beside.

The wedding took place in October 2021. "It never occurred to me that this would be the end with me and Calvin," Kuilema told Michigan Public. "A former student of mine, a transgender male, asked me to officiate his wedding to his lovely wife and I thought, 'Great, this is fantastic, let's do it.'" Before agreeing, he consulted colleagues in his department and members of his personal church, and they all told him it seemed within bounds. Three months later, Calvin launched an investigation, arguing that because one of the individuals being married was also a Calvin employee, Kuilema had aided another employee in violating institutional rules. He was terminated in 2022.

Calvin University, founded in Grand Rapids by the Christian Reformed Church, aligns with the denomination's belief that marriage is strictly between a man and a woman. The institution expects its faculty to uphold these values. "While there is room for personal disagreement with Christian Reformed Church doctrine, the university has clear expectations for employees regarding teaching, scholarship and personal conduct," Calvin officials said in a statement.

The Christian Reformed Church is a Dutch Reformed denomination headquartered in Grand Rapids with roughly 1,000 congregations across North America. For much of its history, the CRC occupied a distinctive space in American Protestantism, rooted in Calvinist theology but intellectually rigorous, open to engaging with science and the broader culture.

Kuilema was baptized and raised in the tradition. "My own grief comes from seeing a denomination I once respected, one that would embrace the science of evolution and allow, if not celebrate, women in office, become just another generic white evangelical church," Kuilema says. "My own sense is that this is largely political and not theological, although it's difficult to separate the two." He goes further, describing the CRC as "in danger of

becoming a generic white evangelical MAGA church," and points to the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, one of Calvin's most prominent intellectual exports, who Kuilema says has essentially called the denomination "fundamentalist." "That's tragic," he says.

To be sure, the denomination has been moving in an increasingly conservative direction since Kuilema officiated the wedding. In 2022, the CRC elevated its traditional stance on marriage and sexuality to "confessional" status, making it a core belief rather than a matter open to debate. In 2025, the denomination went further, ruling that its churches, pastors, elders and deacons must agree with the CRC on matters of confession, including sexuality, or face discipline. When Kuilema officiated the wedding in 2021, the denomination hadn't yet drawn that line, and he and his colleagues felt the Calvin administration was taking a harder position than the CRC itself.

Since the CRC's 2024 synod instructed LGBTQ-affirming congregations to either repent or leave, at least 38 U.S. congregations and 12 Canadian churches have begun or completed the process of disaffiliation. The departures are concentrated in Grand Rapids, where at least eight churches are leaving, including First Christian Reformed Church, one of the four original congregations formed at the denomination's founding in 1857. In February 2025, 33 CRC ministers were ordained into the Reformed Church in America during a ceremony at The Community Church in Ada, just outside Grand Rapids.

For Kuilema, watching the evolution of such a foundational element of his faith has been complicated. "At one level, it's a real loss, a profound sense of abandonment and alienation," he explains. "That said, I, of course, also know that a lot of LGBTQ+ folks, including those in the CRC, have



Joseph Kuilema. Courtesy photo

experienced far more serious rejection, for far longer. I'm a social worker, and we'd call it spiritual abuse."

He has been overwhelmed, he says, by the outpouring of support from Calvin's LGBTQ+ community since his termination, including former students, colleagues and alumni from decades ago who have reached out to express solidarity. "Mixed in with that gratitude is a real sense of loss — a complex grief," he says. "There was at one point a glimmer of hope that Calvin might take a different direction, and it seems like that is now firmly in the past. My sense is a lot of folks are still coming to terms with that. I know I am."

Kuilema filed suit against Calvin in 2023, alleging the university violated his rights under Michigan's Elliott-Larsen

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Civil Rights Act. The legal question at the center of the case is a novel one for Michigan courts: Does the state's civil rights law prohibit "associational discrimination" on the basis of sex?

No one on either side of the argument disputes that if one of the two people Kuilema married had been a different sex, Calvin wouldn't have cared. What Calvin asserts is that Kuilema can only file an Elliott-Larsen claim if his own sex was the basis for the termination. In a 2-1 decision, the Michigan Court of Appeals agreed, finding that "the university's decision to terminate his employment was based upon his decision to officiate a same-sex wedding" and that the outcome would have been the same regardless of Kuilema's sex.

Kuilema and his attorney, Charissa Huang, are asking the Michigan Supreme Court to decide whether Elliott-Larsen covers sex-based associational discrimination. While Michigan courts have recognized associational discrimination claims involving race, no court has yet addressed whether such a claim can be brought on the basis of sex.

"So at one level this is a case about whether there are any protections for allies," Kuilema says. "We are arguing that if you can fire someone for officiating a civil LGBTQ+ wedding, that threatens marriage equality itself." He wants people to understand a detail that often gets lost in the coverage. "We're talking about the right to marriage here, not religious marriage. This was not a religious ceremony."

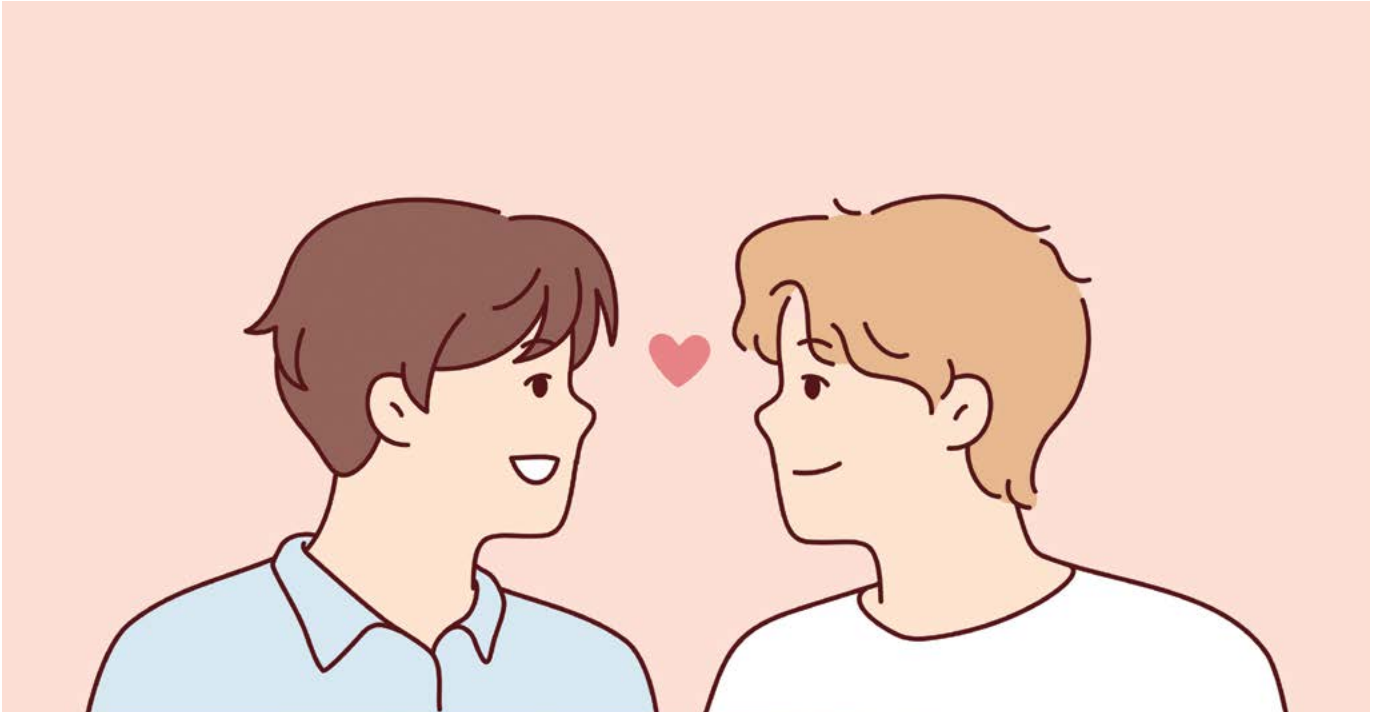
Calvin University maintains that constitutional principles of religious freedom protect the private Christian university's employment decisions. According to Huang, the university claims an ecclesiastical abstention doctrine gives it the right to make employment decisions without court interference. Huang and Kuilema disagree. "The question that the court needs to deliberate on is whether this case requires the court to determine any ecclesiastical, any religious doctrine question," Huang told Michigan Public. "And Joe and I firmly believe that this case does not."

"I helped two individuals access their basic civil rights as Americans to marry one another," Kuilema says. "And I don't think that we should give religion a blank check to discriminate."

A date has not yet been set for the Michigan Supreme Court to hear oral arguments.

Asked what he would say directly to queer and trans people who have complicated relationships with the Reformed tradition, Kuilema's answer doesn't involve legal arguments or denominational politics. "I would say I'm sorry. There are really no other words," he says. "The Reformed tradition had all the tools to get this right and has chosen not to. This is a really terrifying moment. The CRC slammed the door on its LGBTQ+ members at a time when the federal government is increasingly seeking to oppress and erase queer people."

"I hope people are taking care of each other and finding spaces for joy and love," he adds. "I love you. I think God loves you, but if you want no part of that, I totally understand."



In Defense of 'Boyfriend'

For queer people denied the word growing up, choosing it over 'partner' can be a reclaiming

By Evan E. Lambert

No one ever listens to me. Every time I call Renzo my boyfriend, people rechristen him as my “partner.” Moments later, I reassert that he is my “boyfriend,” making the implicit criticism as obvious as Gala Varo’s tuck on “Drag Race México.” And yet, the person still invites me and my “partner” out for drinks afterwards. Why, Gaga, why? Also, I don’t drink.

I know it’s polite among heterosexuals to call someone’s romantic S.O. their partner since it acknowledges the declining power of the marriage-industrial complex, but for me, the word “boyfriend” reclaims an entire lived experience that I lost from being a queer person growing up in a conservative area. I never had a “boyfriend” in high school as many of my straight peers did. I was too busy dodging food and ignoring cruel insults to find — let alone connect with — a compatible queer person in my universe. But now that I have a healthy relationship, I’m finally proud to say that I have a boyfriend. Also, why would I want such a serious label, anyway? I don’t want to use a word that, for many queers, can signify a liminal space between boyfriend and marriage.

“Boyfriend” is my shield against marriage and my repossession of my past.

Before same-gender marriage death-dropped into reality in

2015, “partner” was — to borrow YouTube lingo — S tier. It was the icon, the legend, the moment. The goal. After you worked through your one-night stands (F-tier), DL duds (E-tier), booty calls (D-tier), vacation boyfriends and girlfriends (C-tier), first failed long-term romances (B-tier) and Maybe-It-Could-Works (A-tier), you finally found The One. This person became your “partner”: your counterfeit spouse and greatest chance at integrating into heterosexual society.

Then marriage equality came along, and with the heteronormative institution of marriage available to all, “partner” finally shed its skin, revealing itself as the ersatz, even feeble, facsimile of legal spousehood that it really was. Yet, it still carried more status than “boyfriend” or “girlfriend.” Queer millennials coming of age during the 2000s and 2010s still knew, instinctively, that if they began calling their boyfriend or girlfriend their partner, it meant something. It signified to heteros that they, too, honored and sanctified monogamy and would eventually get married, like them.

Then, around the mid 2010s, heterosexual people began to realize that marriage wasn’t as cracked up as Gen X and Boomers had made it out to be. They eschewed marriage, raging against its failings and hypocrisies, and sought an alternative arrangement which nevertheless expressed love and commitment. They also sought a word that could represent all this. All the better if the word could be edgy somehow, if it could make someone think for even a second that the speaker

See **Boyfriend vs. Partner**, page 26



The Butchlorette Party Has Arrived

Forget the pink sashes, please — pre-wedding celebrations are getting a queer makeover

By Kelli Dunham

For decades, the cultural script for a bachelorette party has been aggressively consistent: matching pink T-shirts with a superfluous indication of the reason for the gathering, most often in a Pinterest-favorite script font. Maybe a tiara that says “Bride.” Possibly a limousine, and at least one nearly anatomically correct

plastic novelty item crafted into a wardrobe item.

And alcohol. Often, copious amounts of alcohol.

But queer weddings have a funny way of calling for script rewrites that never quite fit us in the first place.

In summer of 2024, comedian Rachel Scanlon posted about her “butchlorette party” on social media — a tongue-in-cheek term for a pre-wedding celebration that ditches the traditional bachelorette aesthetic in favor of something that actually reflects the bride’s personality. Scanlon’s party included a boat named “Medium Pimpin,” jaw-dropping fruit platters (which sounds like a euphemism but is not) and folks of all gender presentations



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sporting boldly dyed hair, chomping on cigars.

Which also sounds like a euphemism but is not.

The responses to the Instagram post are a work of art themselves (“it’s the ‘Benny Hill’ captain hat-fire emoji”) and the post brought attention to the way queers are reworking what happens the night before the wedding.

If you are a bride who would rather go camping, play board games, hike dunes or spend a weekend at a cabin with your friends, the standard “rosé all day” itinerary can feel about as natural as wearing a rhinestone sash to chop firewood.

For many queer couples, the shift isn’t really about rejecting celebration. It’s about removing the expectation that celebration has to look one specific way. When the entire institution of marriage has already required some creative rewriting, the pre-wedding party is just another place to ask: What would actually

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Build Your Own Butchlorette

If you're planning a butchlorette (or simply a pre-wedding gathering that doesn't involve inflatable novelty items), starting from scratch can feel onerous. But remember, there are no rules here. Riff on these ideas or come up with your own — either way, tag us in your social posts!

Arcade or bar-game night

Find a place with pinball, darts, pool or retro arcade machines. Winner buys the next round. Loser must give a heartfelt toast about the bride.

Destination: outdoors

Rent a cabin, bring your closest people and spend the weekend hiking, cooking together and staying up late talking. Bonus points for a fire pit and someone who knows how to make excellent pancakes.

Board game marathon

For the proudly nerdy couple, gather everyone for a night of cooperative or competitive board games. Strategy, trash talk and snacks encouraged.

Lake Michigan adventure

Kayaking, paddleboarding, dune hiking or simply sitting around a bonfire watching the sunset. Unless you're particularly hardy (we know some of you are), this is primarily a non-winter choice.

Creative night

One bride hosted a leather-working workshop where everyone made their own belt. Another group tried pottery. No one will forget the bowl that looked like a potato. (And honestly, most of the bowls looked like potatoes.)

Softball or sports day

For the athletic crowd, a casual game followed by a cookout can be the perfect low-key celebration.

Axe throwing or 'Butch Olympics'

Some groups lean into the joke and create their own low-stakes athletic tournament, such as axe throwing, darts, pool, bowling or even a backyard obstacle course. Medals can be made from bottle caps or old softball trophies found at the thrift store.

House-party storytelling

Invite friends to share short stories about how they met the bride or a favorite memory. This can get surprisingly emotional — in a good way.

Service weekend

Some couples choose to mark the moment by giving back. A group volunteer project like helping at a food bank, working on a trail cleanup or assisting an animal rescue, can turn the celebration into a shared, meaningful experience.

Consider your community

Not everyone celebrates with alcohol, and many queer friend groups include people in recovery. Planning activities that don't revolve around drinking (outdoor adventures, game nights, creative workshops) makes the gathering more welcoming for everyone — and it's often cheaper. The point is being together, not how many rounds anyone orders.



feel good to us?

Wedding planner Cheryl Hooten, owner of Dream Day Weddings in Saugatuck, has been working with LGBTQ+ couples in Michigan for years and says queer couples often approach pre-wedding celebrations very differently from the traditional bachelor-bachelorette split.

"Most of the LGBTQ+ couples are doing them together," Hooten notes. "That is the biggest thing I've seen."

Part of that, she says, comes down to how queer friend groups tend to function.

"They're embedded with each other. They're embedded with their friends," she explains. "Your friends are my friends. My friends are your friends. Or they met through those friends." In other words, when your wedding party already overlaps, it can feel a little strange to divide everyone into separate events.

Hooten recently worked with a pair of grooms who decided to combine their celebration into a shared weekend centered around their favorite hobby. "They're nerds and they play board games," she said, laughing. "So they're going to get together and it's like, their friends are my friends and my friends are your friends."

Rather than two separate parties, they're planning one giant, game-filled gathering.

For many couples, these events also look quieter — and more intentional — than the stereotypical Vegas-style bachelor weekend. "It's more that they're doing it together and more thoughtful and



careful,” Hooten says. “They’re going with intention. It’s, ‘We’re going to a cabin in the woods because we love hiking or skiing.’”

Instead of one big blowout, couples are often choosing experiences that feel like the life they already share with their friends, including time outdoors, shared hobbies, long conversations and spending time in meaningful places.

And if that sounds suspiciously

traditional bachelorette party before her own wedding and realizing immediately that she wanted something different.

“The tiaras were cute,” she said. “But I was like, if someone puts one of those on my head, I will simply walk into Lake Michigan. It will be the end of me.”

Instead, her friends organized a butchlorette weekend, complete with a curated itinerary that included kayaking,

couple in southeast Michigan, opted for a “garage butchlorette,” hosted by the bride’s longtime softball teammates. The evening featured darts, pizza, a carefully curated playlist of early 2000s pop-punk and a surprisingly heartfelt round of storytelling about how each person met the bride.

“It ended with everyone sitting on folding chairs in the driveway talking about our friendships,” Lewis told BTL. “Which, honestly, is exactly what you want before someone gets married.”

Destination: queer joy

In West Michigan, many couples fold their celebrations into trips to Saugatuck and Douglas, two lakeshore towns long known for being LGBTQ-friendly.

“Douglas has the Dunes Resort, which is the biggest LGBTQ+ resort in America,” Hooten notes. “So that’s usually one of their stops as well at some point.”

For visiting groups, that can mean dancing all night at the resort — and then spending the next morning recovering with coffee and a walk along the lake.

For many queer couples, places like Saugatuck also carry a sense of history. They are vacation spots where people felt safe traveling together long before marriage equality existed — places where couples could hold hands in public, meet other queer travelers and imagine a future that wasn’t always visible back home.

Hooten says the area has become a meaningful place for many couples.

“I married one couple — two women — oh my god, it had to be 18 years ago,” she says. “They still come into town two or three times a year.”

Sometimes the connection runs even deeper. “One of the couples even moved to town,” she says. This may be the most romantic outcome of a pre-wedding party ever recorded.

But whether the celebration involves a lake house, a garage full of folding chairs or a board game marathon, the through line is the same. Queer couples aren’t skipping the party. They’re just throwing one that makes sense for the people actually in attendance, no sash required.

For many couples, these events look quieter — and more intentional — than the stereotypical Vegas-style bachelor weekend.

wholesome, that’s because sometimes it is.

“I mean, [for some couples] their idea of a wild party is staying up till all hours talking on the deck,” she said.

The butchlorette energy

For butch or masc-of-center brides in particular, the classic bachelorette aesthetic can feel like a costume from a different movie.

Trina Rowan, a 32-year-old Detroit lesbian, described attending a friend’s

a brewery visit, a long bonfire on the beach and a fiercely competitive round of cornhole.

At one point someone attempted to make matching shirts. The shirts said “Bride Squad.” Rowan vetoed them immediately and attempted to replace them with matching flannel shirts from a thrift store.

“Straight people have discovered flannel so the thrift stores only had XXXXL shirts left,” Rowan said. It quickly became a bring-your-own-shirt situation.

Tina Lewis and Mary Lahaye, another



Karan Soni as Naveen in "A Nice Indian Boy." Photo: Levantine Films

Queer Wedding Movies: A New Era of Big Gay Joy

From awkward family moments to extravagant celebrations, these films embrace queer love without apology

By Chris Azzopardi

For a long time, wedding movies stuck to a familiar formula — big feelings, bigger meltdowns and a final walk down the aisle that only counted if the love at the center fit a very straight mold. Queer stories, when they appeared, were often about hiding or compromise, like the sham marriage in Ang Lee's 1993 film "The Wedding Banquet."

But that script is shifting. Newer films like "A Nice Indian Boy" and the reimagined "The Wedding Banquet" don't ask whether queer couples belong at the altar — they assume it and focus on everything that comes with it: joy, culture and chaos. Even in mainstream rom-coms like Netflix's recent hit "People We Meet on Vacation," where a queer wedding simply exists without

explanation, the message is clear.

From fighting for legitimacy to celebrating out loud, these films reflect a new era of big gay wedding joy.

'The Wedding Banquet' (2025)

Same-sex marriage was legalized long after Ang Lee directed "The Wedding Banquet" in 1993. That film followed a Taiwanese American man who agrees to marry his female tenant, a practical arrangement that lets him hide his relationship with his male partner while helping her secure a green card.

Andrew Ahn's 2025 reimagining, co-written with James Schamus, updates that premise for a post-marriage equality America, where the question isn't whether queer people can marry, but what comes with it. This time, the story follows a group of queer friends in Seattle whose lives are out in the open, but still tangled up in expectations around family, commitment and what a "real" future looks like. After two failed rounds of IVF, Angela (Kelly

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(Left) Lily Gladstone and Kelly Marie Tran in “The Wedding Banquet.” Photo: Luka Cyprian / Bleecker Street. (Right) Tommy Do and Miles Heizer in “People We Meet on Vacation.” Photo: Netflix



Marie Tran) and Lee (Lily Gladstone) hit a breaking point — and find an unexpected solution in their own backyard, where their friend Chris (Bowen Yang) lives with his boyfriend, Min (Han Gi-chan). Min, who comes from money but needs to secure his visa, first proposes to Chris. When that doesn't pan out, the plan pivots into something far more complicated, pulling Angela into a marriage arrangement that's as practical as it is emotionally loaded: Min's money means a third attempt at having a child.

Here, the green-card marriage isn't about hiding queerness — it's about everything around it: immigration, money and the messy logistics of building a life. The film even makes space for queer ambivalence around marriage itself, with Lee clarifying she's not anti-marriage so much as “anti-institution” and “pro-celebration.” It's a complicated setup, yes, but not an unrealistic one. Just one where love and logistics are negotiating in real time.

‘A Nice Indian Boy’

Rom-coms don't always get to celebrate queerness with the same joy as straight weddings — but “A Nice Indian Boy” changes that. Naveen (Karan Soni, “Deadpool”) is a socially awkward doctor wondering how his family will take his gay romance as he navigates the path to his own wedding. Enter Jay (Jonathan Groff), a photographer who has embraced Indian culture through his adoptive parents, and the sparks between them fly from a first meeting at a Hindu temple to a chance encounter at Naveen's hospital.

Family adds both warmth and chaos: Megha (Zarna Garg) struggles to reconcile her ideas of romance with what she sees unfolding, while Archit (Harish Patel) finds his own unexpected path toward acceptance. The film thrives in those messy, deeply human moments, like awkward conversations and tender gestures, proving that a big family wedding can be just as exuberant and joyful when the love at its center is queer. For director Roshan Sethi, so much of the film was personal. “The final scene in the movie is that they're kissing, and they're surrounded by their family in a way that is meant to visually echo those circles that came before,” he told BTL. “They're kissing, and they're literally being embraced by their family around them. That is the dream.”

‘Anyone But You’

If there's anything refreshing about the rom-com “Anyone But You,” it's that the straight leads embarrass themselves profusely while the lesbian couple is the emotional anchor — steady, secure and about to wed. Sydney Sweeney's Bea and Glen Powell's Ben spiral through misunderstandings and forced proximity, but it's Alexandra Shipp and Hadley Robinson's Claudia and Halle who quietly reframe the genre with easy warmth. The two share affectionate, adorably cheesy moments the way straight couples have for decades. While everyone else is falling apart, Claudia has exactly one thing on her mind: “Honestly, I just want this wedding to be beautiful because I love the shit out of her and I just want to marry the bitch, you know what I'm saying?”

Sure, there are noticeably no queer guests at this wedding — but can we toast to lesbians with disposable income? The ceremony itself is a destination celebration on the cliffs of Marks Park in Australia's Tamarama, with panoramic views of the Pacific and Bondi's coastline. There's no coming-out arc, no explanation — just a wedding that exists as fact. In a film that thrives on chaos, their love story is at least the one thing that doesn't feel like a joke.

‘People We Meet on Vacation’

Even in a friends-to-lovers story built around Poppy (Emily Bader) and Alex (Tom Blyth) — the kind of sun-soaked Netflix rom-com that feels like a warm hug — “People We Meet on Vacation” quietly celebrates queer joy. From the very first minutes, David (Miles Heizer) calls Poppy to scold her for not RSVP'ing to his upcoming wedding to his partner Nam (Tommy Do).

When Poppy heads to Barcelona, the film treats the gay wedding as a moment worth honoring rather than backgrounding. The celebration is full of queer guests, including a slow dance between two attendees — a small but vivid reminder of the kind of visibility and joy that sticks with you if you've ever wondered whether that could be you. The “I dos” take place beneath a backdrop of white flowers and twinkling lights as the officiant announces, “You may now kiss your husband.” David and Nam's marriage doesn't just feel like décor or filler — it anchors the story, grounding Poppy and Alex's emotional reunion in the joy of a queer couple fully living their love.

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FROM CLASSROOM CHAOS TO NEW DAD LIFE, JOE DOMBROWSKI LEVELS UP



Joe Dombrowski. Courtesy photo

The breakout comedian pivots from viral teacher humor to raising a newborn

By Kelli Dunham

During a recent interview with comedian Joe Dombrowski about his upcoming special “Dad on Arrival,” he was, fittingly, in the middle of it all — juggling new fatherhood in real time. At one point, the conversation turned into a kind of live demonstration: Could

Dombrowski feed a highly kinetic infant while delivering funny, thoughtful answers? The answer, unequivocally, was yes.

Raised in Michigan and now based in Seattle, Dombrowski first broke out online with comedy rooted in his life as an elementary school teacher, spinning classroom stories into cathartic, laugh-out-loud moments for educators everywhere — the kind that make you briefly forget about grading backlogs, that mysterious smell in the back of the room and the latest email from the superintendent about cell phone policy. His profile got a major boost after Ellen DeGeneres invited him on her show

following his viral spelling-bee prank, but he’s been building a following with both teacher and non-teacher material for more than a decade. His debut 2023 special, “Don’t Eat the Crayons,” leaned fully into classroom chaos and the strange anthropology of parent-teacher conferences.

“Dad on Arrival,” available now on YouTube, marks a shift.

He’s still talking about school. Still talking about students, parents and the general absurdity of being responsible for other human beings. The difference now: that he’s one of the parents — and a brand-new one at that. The material opens up accordingly,

frat brothers! One after another saying you were the same person they knew back then. It felt like your entire life was showing up there.

I guess I'm just a mystical gay charmer. [Laughs.] Yeah, the frat. My frat brothers really did pop their heads in on that one, which was funny. They were all on a golf outing the day that aired. Overall, the comments were really positive. I was surprised! There were some loser comments mixed in, but I mean, let the trash take itself out.

Some people just don't have enough to do.

Exactly.

I was also struck by how many people from different parts of your life were chiming in.

I know, I love that. If you meet somebody who knows me, they say I'm the same person that you see on stage, off stage. I'm the same person that I've always been. And I take pride in that. It's not a persona, this is just what I do.

One of the things about my comedy is that when you come to my show, no matter who you are, you're never out of the joke. My show is gay because I am. I'm just talking to you about life. It happens to be through the lens of a gay guy. And when you look out in the audience, it's a very diverse mix of people.

Even with a newborn, you're still touring — that's impressive! How are you doing it?

Yeah. I don't know how. God bless the grandmas, who are coming in to save the day when I go on the road.

What's the biggest difference between "Don't Eat the Crayons" and "Dad on Arrival"?

The evolution from teacher to parent is really unique. I thought I understood kids as a teacher. Now I'm a parent [gulps]. It's funny when I watch "Don't Eat the Crayons," I'm like, "Oh, you really thought you knew, didn't you?"

I was thinking about that while watching the bit about parent-teacher conferences. I wondered if you're going to be a different parent in that room than the parents you used to deal with.

Oh, for sure. Because being a teacher was such an eye-opening experience — you see people for who they are at all walks of life. You have these parents come in who are a little jaded, who have a chip on their shoulder.

But now, having to go into parent-teacher conferences — we're already doing that, interviewing preschools that he's gonna end up going to — I have to catch myself and be like, "Oh hey, you are that asshole now. Do you remember how those assholes used to talk to you when you were getting paid \$25,000 a year?" And now, as a parent, I'm like, they just want the absolute best for their child. It's the most important thing in the world.

Before the baby arrived, what were you most excited about? And now that the baby is here, what's been the most exciting — or terrifying — part?

I think that I had rose-colored glasses on more than I ever should have. I didn't really focus on just how hard it was gonna be. You know all these people who are parents, and you have your own parents, and you're like, "Well, they survived."

But holy shit, I'm dying. I've never been this tired in my life, and I was not expecting that. You quite literally stop everything. There's nothing else you can do during that time that they're awake except be their parent. And it took a quick adjustment. But once you succumb to that, it's beautiful. And then, it's really cool to just ignore everything else that's going on in the world — especially now when there's such craziness happening — and just focus on your family.

Some of the funniest parts of the special are straight out of the fertility clinic waiting room. What surprised you most about this process for your family?

We found that even in Seattle, the system is clearly built for straight couples. You are quickly reminded you're living in

moving easily from fertility clinics to colonoscopies to Midwest food cravings to the cultural whiplash of relocating from Michigan to Seattle. Like the best comics, Dombrowski delivers big laughs while sneaking in something deeper: a perspective shaped in real time, somewhere between the classroom and the nursery.

Of course I know better, but when I watched your appearance on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert" on YouTube ahead of this interview, I couldn't stop myself from taking a peek at the comments. There were so many lovely ones, including from your

somebody else's world. My husband's name is Morgan and people would say, "Oh well, when she gets here..." I'd be like "Oh yeah, her and her huge clit will be here in just a second."

You start to realize so many different nuances of being a gay parent: being billed twice on accident because we're both men and they don't know who's the dad. So they're billing both of the people.

For the most part, people are curious, and we don't make anyone feel stupid for asking questions. But you are very quickly reminded that we as LGBTQ+ people are out of the loop most of the time, and you just have to navigate that. In my case, it made for hilarious stories that went into the special.

What joke in the special gets the most unexpected but consistent laugh?

There's one from the first special where I talk about moving to Seattle from Michigan, and I say, "My husband and I were very liberal, we're very open-minded, but when we moved to Seattle, we looked at each other and said, "Are we Republicans?" That never fails. And from the current special, when I tell people I had to get a colonoscopy and the doctor said, "Hey Joe, this might hurt a little," and I said, "I think we're fine." Never fails.

You've also released two crowd-work specials. How did you get good at crowd work?

I'm an extrovert who's riddled with ADHD. But also, people categorize comedians as crowd-work comics, and that's not really a thing. If you're a comedian and you can't do crowd work, you're not a comedian. We're live performers, and anything could happen in the room at any moment. If someone volleys at you, you volley it back.

Being a teacher helped because you never know what's going to happen in the classroom, and you just have to roll with the punches. My students were basically little drunk adults, and comedy clubs are drunk adults who act like 5 year olds.

You talk in the special about your dad encountering Seattle culture for the first time. Have those conversations with your parents changed over time?



Joe Dombrowski during his "Dad on Arrival" special. Courtesy photo

We've been here almost nine years now. In the beginning, it was pretty much like walking them around and saying, "Hey, we're not in a zoo. Just keep to yourself." But the thing I never thought I'd hear both my parents say is that now that they have their first grandbaby, they realize we are in the best place for us and for our family.

As weird as Seattle might be to them, they know that for the vast majority of people, my baby living with two dads is generally accepted.

What do you miss most about the Midwest?

Jet's Pizza with ranch dressing, more than anything. Oh my god, that used to run through my veins. Also, the food in general. We don't have Arabic food over here in Seattle, which is crazy. My mom's from Dearborn — I grew up on that.

Lastly, if a young gay kid in Southeast Michigan watches your special, what do you hope they take away from it?

It's so cliché, but it's so true: If you want to do something, you can. You're going to get a lot of no's along the way. But you will find a way to get a yes if you want to get a yes. So the only person who can ultimately tell you a final no is you. So you might as well keep hustling, sister.



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◀ Boyfriend vs. Partner

Continued from page 13

might be queer. Thus, "partner" went mainstream.

There was irony in how "partner" leapt from queer communities to heterosexual parlance, and it was in the timing. This shift seemed to come just as many young queer people — myself included — began questioning the inherent heteronormativity of marriage. The concept of marriage had been shoved down our throats by every book, movie, social gathering and dinner with the parents from time immemorial. We were not ungrateful for the work our forebears had put in to achieve marriage equality, but we had become weary of conforming to social norms. We had been doing it all our lives, after all. So, we largely replaced "spouse" with "partner" as well.

All of this to say, once again, that I hate it when people hoist "partner" on me. When I'm expected by my straight friends to use "partner," it's like being expected by them to get married all over again, but with cooler lingo. Why must I conform to yet another expectation? Why can't I say "boyfriend" without someone leveling me up? I want a "boyfriend." I want all the secret kisses, late nights, alleyway makeouts, wilted roses, superficial status and furious rebellion that the word implies. I want that explosive moment when I say the word out loud to my parents for the first time, changing our relationship forever. I want that feeling of walking down the hall, hand in hand, and everyone thinking, "They're boyfriends." Of course, it's not Brittany from Biology thinking this, now that I'm an adult. It's some random 60-year-old Aunt Gladys in Food Lion.

But that's still what I want.

Indeed, that's what I never had, coming of age in a beet red region of Virginia in the early 2000s, pre-Gay Lance Bass.

There's also the simple matter of me and my boyfriend only being together for three years. Need I remind you that the word "partner" still has a reputation as a stepping stone to marriage for queers? Perhaps it's not that I want to linger in this boyfriend stage simply to regain something lost. Perhaps it's also that I don't want a larger commitment just yet, respectability politics be damned. My fellow queers will keep getting married and I'll keep fighting alongside them for that right, but my personal participation is not necessary for the future of the institution. That will come when I'm good and ready. You'll all know when it happens because I'll start calling that guy I'm always with my partner.

It's funny, because in Peru, where I now live with my boyfriend Renzo, there's no extra connotation surrounding the word "pareja," or partner. Here, it doesn't mean anything serious and it's practically synonymous with "boyfriend" or "girlfriend." Of course, I didn't know that when Renzo, after a year of dating me, introduced us as "parejas" at a party. I blacked out in that moment: red lights danced across my vision and screeching tire brakes obliterated my eardrums. I thought my life was over. I thought I had wound up in a gay "Fatal Attraction." We've worked things out since then.

But I still won't call Renzo my partner. At least not in English.

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